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ABSTRACT

The following two major questions are addressed in this paper: How can the mounting research on the relationship of the home to children's school success be translated into practical action in communities across the nation? And, how can all families become meaningfully involved in children's education? Part of the answer to both those questions is that parent involvement must be seen as basic to the school process. It must be funded and supported consistently in the same way that reading, writing, and mathematics are supported. Priority attention should be given to developing the mode of participation which directly involves parents in the education of their own child: the parent-as-tutor approach. That new role for parents involves a new role for teachers also: a community-coaching role. The paper goes on to describe how those role functions have been implemented by the Home and School Institute (HSI), whose system has been used successfully in 12 demonstration projects at 35 sites nationally. Finally, the U.S. Department of Education's publication "What Works" (1986) is used as the basis for 10 recommendations that provide basic components of a program to encourage greater awareness of the community and family role in children's education. A list of references is included. (PS)

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THE PARENT GAP IN COMPENSATORY EDUCATION AND HOW TO BRIDGE IT

by

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THE PARENT GAP IN COMPENSATORY EDUCATION AND HOW TO BRIDGE IT

Two major questions addressed in this paper are:

- How can the mounting research on the relationship of the home to children's school success be translated into practical action in communities across the nation?
- How can we involve all families meaningfully in children's education.

The Parent Gap

A great deal is already known about the importance of the family as educator. Yet, the focus for and the responsibility for educational reform has centered almost exclusively on the school.

While there have been specific efforts to work with families, they are fragmentary and come and go, usually go in times of budget cutbacks. Local schools have not yet been supported or encouraged to work with the home or with other community agencies in a concerted, systematic manner.

The major thrust for education reform, including the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), focused almost exclusively on the school. That report addressed parents only in a postscript: "As surely as you are your children's most important teachers, your children's ideas about education and its significance begin with you. Moreover, you bear a responsibility to participate in your children's education".

These are good words. But what is the parents' responsibility? And what is the responsibility of policy makers?

The 1984 State Legislative Summary of Children and Youth Issues, in the rush of activity after the National Commission report, identified over 600 different bills affecting children and youth. Clearly, policy makers are seeking ways to support and strengthen the family. Many of these laws affect children's schooling and they could have included measures to promote family involvement, but, in most cases, they did not (National Conference on State Legislatures, 1984).

Reform activities and initiatives, summarized by the publication Education Week (1985), included such traditional

topics as career ladders and competency tests for teachers, higher graduation requirements, and limitations on extracurriculars for students. No state identified family-school involvement as a strategy to be used to address educational issues.

What Works, the just published report by the U.S. Department of Education (1986) is the most supportive document attesting to the impact of parent involvement in children's schooling. It is an important opening step.

The startling "parent gap" in the policies and programs of the education reform movement is explainable: One reason is that there is a basic lack of knowledge about the research and experience which point to the significance of the family in the education of children. Another reason for the "parent gap" is the appealing myth that parent involvement doesn't cost money, that it's all free or should be free. The work done by parents and children at home is free once involvement programs are set in place. However, what isn't free is the funding needed to put these programs into place, for personnel (a coordinator or home-school liaison worker to reach out to families) and for materials families use at home (home activities and other parenting information).

If parent involvement is regarded as important and critical to children's school success--and it is now known that it is--then parent involvement must be seen as basic to the school process; it must be funded and supported consistently in the same way that reading, writing and math are supported.

Reasons for Bridging the Gap

Current Research

Briefly, what is already known about family involvement programs is that they address major school problems. Among them are: disappointing student academic achievement; poor work behaviors and attitudes of students; and the relationship between home and school (Collins, Moles, & Cross, 1982).

Research evidence indicates that parent involvement raises the academic achievement of students; improves attitudes and performance of children in school; helps parents understand the work of the schools; enables parents and children to communicate more and show their caring toward each other; and builds school-community relationships in an ongoing, problem-preventing way (Epstein, 1984).

In Maryland, researcher Joyce Epstein (1983) additionally found that, "Parents who participated in involvement programs were more positive about the teacher's interpersonal skills, and rated the teacher higher in overall teaching ability.... In other words, teachers who work at parent involvement are considered better teachers than those who remain more isolated from the families of the children they teach."

The evaluation report (Year I on the Home and School Institute's multilingual home activity project) reported the following additional payoff. For the teachers, the major benefit have been increased parental involvement with their child's school experiences. More parents came to school conferences and more parents contacted the school regarding their child's absence from school or aspects of their child's school work. This finding was very clear for the teachers (Trinity College, 1984).

As one teacher said to the evaluator: "This project has helped pull parents into the school. The parents of my kids have been usually involved this year, not just in coming to school for programs and parent conferences but they're calling more and sending more notes. I also sense they are looking at the homework more than last year" (Trinity College, 1984).

Finding ways for schools to establish family support in education is strategic use of scarce public resources. A minor input of school staff time and materials makes major output of parent support possible.

Today's Family

Schools must work with a new kind of family today--not necessarily worse or better, but different. Without going into elaborate demographic detail, it is sufficient to note that the majority of mothers today hold jobs outside the home and that single parenting is on the increase. It is predicted that by the year 2000, 50 percent of all children will have lived at least for a time, in a single parent household (Bureau of the Census, 1985). Working parents may not be able to come to 2 p.m. school events, but they want to help their children (Home and School Institute, 1984). Even under the constraints of limited time and financial pressures, today's parents care about the value of their children's schooling. After years of heavy dependence on the school to do everything, the public appears ready to assume more responsibility for what's happening to children. In recent Gallup Polls, lack of discipline was cited as a major school problem. When asked for the cause of the school's discipline problems, the public, including parents, laid chief blame on the home (Phi Delta Kappan, 1984).

Most parents today are better educated than those of previous decades. It's no secret that parents are asking questions, making demands, and showing concern. Parents are seeking involvement in the education of their children. They may not come to meetings at school, but parents are interested in ways to help their own children--ways that are easy, fast, and linked to their children's school achievement (Home and School Institute, 1979).

New Roles for Schools and for Families

It's been traditional to talk about the need for family support of the school. And that has usually been defined through such activities as advisory council and volunteer work in the classroom. For the majority of families, this is out-of-date and ineffective as an approach for home-school relations today.

What's needed now is not old-fashioned support of the school, but new and different support for the educational role of the family. It is increasingly clear that priority attention should be given to developing the mode of participation which directly involves parents in the education of their own child. This is often referred to as the "parent-as-tutor" approach.

The reasons for this position are two-fold. First, it is the approach which a continuing line of research indicates is most directly linked to improved academic achievement. The second reason for this position is that it offers the greatest opportunity for equity for widespread involvement and sustained participation. Programs which require attendance at meetings or involvement in school activities during the day will necessarily have limited participation. The need to reach out to single parents and to families in which both parents are employed is a special concern. Furthermore, this approach appeals to the most basic parental motivation for involvement in the first place--the desire to help one's child do better in school.

What do I mean in practical terms when I speak of the family's educational role? It's old-fashioned because it will sound like what parents have always done. And it's very modern because many parents today never learned or have forgotten what they had to do at home to pave the way for their child's success in school. In recent years, education became a job for the school, and usually for the school alone. It is now known from research and common sense that education, to be successful, has to be a team effort. But there are a lot of people

out there who don't know this or they don't know how they can help.

Let me amplify my approach to the family role. The traditional form of family involvement of the last two decades has been the advisory council with families in an advisory capacity, as in Title I PACs. Good or effective family involvement appropriate for today's families is different. The advisory role, while it may have been a relevant and useful model at the time it was designed, is no longer the most appropriate involvement method. This is due to the changes in family life and to the findings of educational research.

Appropriate involvement today provides learning strategies for families to use at home. These reinforce but do not duplicate the school. Today's involvement uses the school, community agencies, and businesses to "deliver support" to families in their important role in the education of their children.

Effective involvement today needs to be based on a non-deficit view of families. More traditionally, families have been identified by deficits, with the school in a compensatory role. My position, based on experience with thousands of families across the nation, is that there are strengths in every family that can be mobilized into effective educational action (Home and School Institute, 1983).

The roles of parents and teachers are different--they are different but they are complementary. The family is in the ideal position to prepare for, expand, and extend the work of the school. To use the family only to duplicate the school does not take advantage of the family's significant educational role. Beyond traditional homework, there is the unique opportunity for families to engage in individualized give-and-take with students at "teachable moments" that teachers can only dream about.

However, there is still a prevailing idea that working with families is somehow too complex a task and if only we could tune the school, that seemingly controlled environment, to a finer degree, that schooling problems would be solved. While I have great respect for the school, and I am a longtime schoolteacher, it is clear from our own Institute research and from the research of others that this approach is like expecting a three-legged stool to stand firmly on one leg, that of the school alone.

Schooling needs to be thought about in the same way as football games and orchestras. You can't play a football game alone, no matter how good a player you are. And you can't play a symphony without the rest of the orchestra. Right now,

schools are being asked to play the game without all the players on the field--and that's no way to win.

Educators can be helped to see themselves, not just as classroom leaders, but as community leaders, corralling and connecting the other people outside the classroom who have so much impact on what children do inside the classroom. Everyone has a part to play, and when structured effectively, these parts combine and complement one another. For example, in the last two years, the National Education Association (1985) has been sending home Institute activities from teachers to families in 17 states. The work of the teacher and the parent do not overlap in these programs. Each plays as a member of the team, and response is overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

The community-coaching role that I recommend for teachers cannot be accomplished if their effort is viewed as an extra, something "nice" but not really essential. This is the way parent involvement is usually viewed, and this is the damaging misconception that I have analyzed in my new book, The Forgotten Factor in School Success--The Family (Rich, 1985).

Briefly, here is how the Home and School Institute (HSI) system works and it has worked in 12 different demonstration projects at 35 sites nationally, including programs for special education and bilingual families.

A New Kind of Involvement

The HSI system provides parents with techniques to foster children's learning. In fact, parents who already know the value of informal education may be using these on their own. The key to the HSI system is to motivate all parents to get directly involved in the education of their own children.

These are activities that do not duplicate the work of the school. The activities are not keyed to tomorrow morning's test but to the basic attitudes and skills children need to do well everyday in school and out. The techniques for the young child are such activities as using the clock to teach arithmetic, using the TV schedule to keep to time limits, dialing and reading telephone numbers; for the older youngsters, activities include filling in blank comic strips with home-made dialogue, making good purchases at the store, or using maps for family trips.

The material is written and presented in such a way that parents know exactly what to do. They are encouraged to use their own imagination and creativity. They are told they can do nothing wrong. An activity, for example, is "Measure for

Pleasure." In this, families measure everything in a room. "Catalog Shopping Spree" is another. In this, families "hypothesize about what to buy and make some wise buying judgments." Another is "Current Events Wall," where children and parents post articles and materials in which they are interested. There's "Morning Messages" where everyone in the family writes to each other. After a while, families start to make up their own activities. The activities are done alongside household routines. A hurried parent in a few minutes a day can teach science or reading or math or writing in a relaxed, at-home way.

These programs have been documented to raise academic achievement and improve student attitudes. The distribution system for these programs is as follows: In the course of a semester, classroom teachers send the activities--one each week--home with students. Together, children and their parents do them. Parents return feedback sheets that indicate they have completed the activity. This interaction increases communication among all participants.

The key to this system and the way it differs from other programs is not these activities as such, although, they are very carefully designed. HSI methods stimulate families to continue use of activities such as these at home on a regular basis. It has been very gratifying in my 20 years of working with parents, many of whom are foreign immigrants, many of whom are on welfare with little education themselves, to see how deeply they desire their children to succeed.

The Institute programs are built on a nondeficit approach to families. The key is to use qualities and innate capacities that virtually all parents have. A parent's capacity for caring, concern and love for their children is already in place: The nondeficit approach builds on these and on the capacities parents have for self-help.

HSI programs appeal to parents because they provide self-help techniques that do not demand that families have money, be well educated or even highly literate. They build on the motivation and the love that parents have for their children.

HSI trains teachers to tell parents how important they are in teaching their child and gives teachers the prepared home learning materials to use. In some programs, such as the one that HSI created in Los Angeles, parents teach other parents (Plaskett, 1978).

By and large, teachers generally have not received training in reaching out to parents, nor do they know the research which underscores the importance of doing this.

Often, even if they want to work with parents, they do not get the support and the time from their school systems to do it. The Institute works with school administrators to win their support in this critically needed effort. Some school administrators do recognize the importance of this work, but they are still few and far between.

Recommendations for Action

To take advantage of the family role in education will take some reorientation of policies and programs. It requires people, information and programs to make things happen. Willing volunteers, even parents, need help and direction. If they didn't, right now across the country there would be all the family support from families that is latent but has not been tapped. It needs mobilization. This section outlines the steps in a mobilization plan. My recommendation is that the Federal government, in its leadership role, share programmatic approaches with states and localities.

Here is a basic design presenting 10 essential themes needed to conduct a successful home-school program keyed to the educational role of the family. This design has been selected because it can be put down anywhere and work. Yet at the same time, there is room for local individualization and application.

In What Works, the U.S. Department of Education made clear that research supports the following significant key findings: (a) "Parents are the children's first and most influential teachers. What parents do to help their children learn is more important to academic success than how well-off the family is" and (b) "Parent involvement helps children learn more effectively. Teachers who are successful at involving parents in their children's schoolwork are successful because they work at it" (U.S. Department of Education, 1986).

Building on What Works

The following recommendations provide structure for carrying out the points in What Works. They are keyed to basic needs of families and educators to put changes into action. Each also lists ways to carry out the recommendation.

The overall goal is to increase public awareness about the family's impact on learning, to emphasize family and school strengths and to give all families practical things to do to help themselves and to help their children learn better.

Teachers and families need information, and they need support to use it. The school is the key facilitator of this approach. Educators can help families and the community assume appropriate responsibility for children's success in school.

1. Set a base of understanding and acceptance of the parent-as-educator concept through an information campaign. This helps ensure the success of programs that call upon families to take steps on their own.

   Example: A local media campaign can begin to educate the public on HOME: A SPECIAL LEARNING PLACE. Signs, slogans, home learning activities through the radio, TV, back-of-the bus signs, messages on grocery bags and on construction fences carry the message with this general theme: Home + School = Learning.

2. Identify ways to encourage fathers to be involved directly in the care and education of their children and in their children's schooling.

   Example: A media campaign can be started showing fathers working with children. These public service messages can appear on TV during sports broadcasts. This enhances the image of the "macho" man as caregiver to children.

3. Provide meaningful roles for the private sector. Businesses can receive information and materials to support the family/school relationship. The choices for private employers to help parents are not limited to setting up child care centers.

   Example: Encourage the contributions of business to the work of schools beyond sending occasional volunteers into the classroom. This could mean employers giving time to employees to participate in parent/teacher conferences and also distributing parenting information that helps employees with work/home conflicts.

   Example: Parenting information for families should be available (in easy-to-read, easy-to-use leaflets) from every school and also from places like doctors' offices and supermarkets. Families across the nation have similar needs for similar kinds of information. (National Education Association, 1985)

   Concern about children and lack of time to be with them are fundamental sources of anxiety and inattention for working mothers (Bureau of National Affairs, 1986). These can lead to job performance problems.

Working mothers (and fathers too) need the tools that can help them manage the demands of their work and home lives—as well as their children's education.

HSI is now developing the CAREERS AND CARING PROGRAM. This is a series of how-to activities that employees are given to take home. Employees use these to manage the often competing demands of work and home life and build their children's abilities at the same time.

While providing support from business, this is essentially a self-help approach that extends responsibility to employees and provides strategies employees use to help themselves, their families, and their schools.

4. Assign educational responsibilities to the family. Federal policy and programs should help localities focus on the methods identified by research as being the most effective. These should emphasize the educational role of the family.

   Example: Original ESEA Title I programs were designed with the family/community functioning at best in an advisory capacity. This is no longer the most appropriate involvement method. A redirection of this policy at all levels, to take advantage of the family's educative role is now in order. This will entail reorientation for state and school personnel administering local programs.

   Example: Use a school/home involvement system that provides families with specific, practical activities they can do to help their children learn. HSI has tested home learning activities that simultaneously provide reinforcement in an academic subject, teach a daily life skill to children, and meet the time needs of working parents. These home activities while supportive of school, should use the unique resources of the home and neighborhood and be different from traditional schoolwork. Such programs cost next to no money and foster parent-child closeness and are enthusiastically received by parents, children and teachers.

5. Provide teachers with training and information to help them work well with families. Teachers need training and materials to help them work more closely and effectively with today's family. Part of a new and enhanced role for teachers is to facilitate what is learned outside the classroom

with what is learned inside. This means that teachers need additional training to work with adults as well as with children.

Example: Experience with HSI School and Family-Community Involvement training for educators indicates that teachers on the job have not been prepared for work with families. Teachers need to know the research about families as educators, and they need to know the strategies for reaching and teaching adults. Providing this know-how to new teachers should be expected from and included in current teacher training. Training programs can be designed so that teachers on the job can participate in half-day sessions to gain these needed skills.

6. Support family involvement as an integral and funded part of the school's services. Schools should recognize the family as a system--a system for teaching and learning across the grades in all subjects.

Example: Set up an Office for Family Involvement in the school system to support home-school liaison work at every school.

Example: Train paraprofessionals for the specific job of working to connect home and school.

Example: Establish Family Resource Centers at schools and businesses, perhaps staffed by senior citizens, where parents can meet to get information and materials on childrearing and education.

7. Provide ways for families to help each other. Find ways to support the work of parent-to-parent programs. The current interest in self-help has been identified as a Megatrend.

Example: Incentives can be provided for schools to establish peer-support groups for teen parents, for single and working parents. Outside groups such as "Parents Without Partners" can be encouraged to organize and hold meetings at the schools and to focus on school-family concerns.

8. Provide support for complementary efforts to schools from hospitals, child care groups--all who work with children. Start with children's earliest years: Provide information for parents about their significant educative role from a child's birth on.

Example: Education for successful schooling can begin with in-hospital programs to provide new parents with practical tips and information on how they can help their infants develop optimally.

9. Integrate more education in family day care. Schools should support education programs for children in family day care. The majority of early childhood care in this country is being offered in family day care homes: It is recognized that before-school education is vital to the success of children in school.

   Example: Educational training and visits to schools can be organized for family day care providers. To provide incentives, family day caregivers can obtain accreditation for their successful participation in such programs. Preschool care providers need to see how their work ties in with the work of the schools.

10. Involve senior citizens and non-parents. Senior citizens, growing in number, more vigorous and healthy in later years than every before, are an untapped resource for helping families and teachers.

    Example: The HSI Senior Corps curriculum, field-tested in the inner city, provides a model for communities to consider. It is a structured basic skills curriculum for seniors to use in working with students with special needs in class and it also provides complementary activities for the students' family to use at home. The family and the senior form a team to help the student overcome learning difficulties.

Infrastructure for Change

The recommendations above are basic components of a campaign to encourage greater awareness of the total community's role (especially families) in the education of children. This campaign will serve four primary purposes: (1) to involve the media to increase public understanding of the family's critically important role in children's education; (2) to give parents (and other adults caring for children) practical things they can do to help children learn; (3) to involve business as a distributor of parenting and education information to their employees and to their customers; and (4) to ensure that senior citizens and other populations beyond parents are integrated into this community education process.

This sets in place a basic home-school infrastructure which to date has not been built. Infrastructure in education

means connecting schools more formally to the rest of society--to the family and the home, the outside-of-school environments in which children spend more time than they do in school.

The fact that the recent education reports focused so much on teachers when they are but one cog, albeit important, in the education machinery is evidence of lack of infrastructure in education. Just as good health depends on more than medical care, education depends on more than schooling.

This infrastructure can be put in place fairly quickly: It is not a new level of bureaucracy. It is a connector, taking advantage of what is already there to ensure that home, school, and community work together.

School and family responsibilities are increasing and will increase even more in the near future. Before 1990, there will be more young children in school and more mothers in the workplace. Minority students are increasingly the majority of students in urban schools (Hodgkinson, 1985). For more students to succeed, it is vital to enable families to have greater positive impact on children's schooling.

Fortunately, there is today a convergence of opportune forces and needs about families and schools:

- Teachers are realizing more than ever that they must work in partnership with parents and the community.
- A growing research base is affirming the impact of families as educators of their children.
- There is strong interest in this country in self-help initiatives rather than in waiting for government and institutions to take care of individual needs.

These are the strengths that the Federal government can build upon to provide educational leadership that states and localities are ready for and will be pleased to receive.

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